

My Future Revisited

by Dr. Edward Hoffman

"And exactly what do you do for me?" asked then NASA Deputy Administrator, Hans Mark.

As was his custom, Dr. Mark was hosting a winter holiday social for Cooperative Education Students from NASA Headquarters. Standing in a corner of the room trying to appear inconspicuous, I was feeling privileged to be one of the lucky CO-OP students at the home of the Deputy Administrator.

But I nearly choked when I realized Dr. Mark was talking to me. Before I could say anything, he put the question in context for everyone there whose ears were now raised. "I know why the other students are here," he said. "They're all engineering students. I know what they can do for NASA, but why do I need a psychologist on staff?"

Understand now this was almost twenty years ago. The other thirty or so people attending the party probably forgot the question shortly after it was asked. But for me it serves as a small moment of truth and remains vividly etched in my awareness all these years later.

First, it indicates the degree to which a professional working in a behavioral field focusing on individual and team development was at one time virtually invisible at NASA. More important, it underscores what a dramatically different place NASA has become.

In the early 1980's, professional development at NASA more or less followed the traditional apprenticeship model. Valued professionals, mostly engineers and scientists, spent many years fine-tuning their skills within their selective disciplines. When an opportunity to manage a project came up, it normally was under the direction of an experienced tutor, often more than one.

Professional development was once a slow process, believe it or not, nourished by an organization of seasoned veterans. Experience was acquired over a lengthy duration in which the individual could experience all phases of a project. The need for professional development was muted and at best supplementary.

Since then much has changed at NASA. We've gone from large projects that generally take many years to complete to smaller ones that happen, as we all know, Faster, Better, and Cheaper. In keeping with this new paradigm, the apprenticeship approach is gone, replaced by accelerated learning programs. Myriad tools exist to prepare the modern project manager - web-tools, career development models, intact team support, benchmarking, coaching, simulation training, knowledge sharing, university programs, formal mentoring, e-learning, lunch symposiums, etc., etc. All of these came into existence to quickly prepare managers to survive in an environment of speed, change, and the rapid transitions that occur around the borders of chaos. Is



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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

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it better this way? That question is for another article. For now, let's just say it is how it is.

There's little doubt when Dr. Mark asked what exactly do you do for me, he had no idea how NASA was going to change in the next two decades. The truth is I had no idea myself how different a place NASA would become in twenty years. But had I, and had I told all, you could bet no one in the room would have dared believe it could all come true.